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ABSTRACT

This in-process report discusses the writing development of a student from first grade through mid-eighth grade. An analysis of the student's T-unit length averages from third grade to mid-eighth grade reveals a leap of syntactic complexity from the fifth to the sixth grade. Among the other findings are the following: two modes of writing--narration and exposition--dominate the student's writings, suggesting that restrictions may be placed on students' potential when they are limited to only a couple of modes; the student's progress may be more directly related to experiences with a few good teachers than to textbooks or curriculum; analysis of the use of conjoining elements as T-unit openers reveals very little about the student's writing skills; and writing maturity at the middle school years and beyond may not lend itself to investigations via clause expansion--as was done in the early T-unit studies--but rather to investigations via verb phrase expansion. (GW)

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D.K.: Half A Case Study of Writing

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D.K.: Half A Case Study of Writing

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For the past eight years, I have been following the developing writing skills of a young man I will call D.K., for purposes of anonymity. Through a special arrangement I receive all the free-writing papers this young man brings home to his parents. I have been following D.K. since the first grade, focusing on his writing when he entered the third grade. He is now in the eighth grade, attending a middle school in a southern state.

This is an in-process report, covering about half a case study of D.K.'s development as a writer. Drawing any conclusions at this point would be premature. However, I would like to share with you some initial surprises, since they may be of interest, especially to elementary and middle school teachers.

It has been more than a decade since Kellogg Hunt's pioneer study (1965) concerning the development of written syntactic maturity in school children. Hunt's T-unit method of analysis has revolutionized writing research, and his initial findings

have been reaffirmed in such classic studies as O'Donnell, Griffin, and Norris (1967) and Loban (1976). Hunt used a mixed-mode collection of writings in his cross-sectional study, and revealed that fourth graders write about 8.6 words per T-unit (w/T), eighth graders about 11.5 w/T, and twelfth graders about 14.4 w/T.

Hunt cautioned teachers and researchers not to interpret his figures as norms of writing ability, but many have--and still do. I mentioned the mixed-mode base of his writings, since Seegars (1933), San José (1972) and my own studies (1976-77) concentrate on the relationship of mode to writing complexity. To date mode-based studies have determined that any attempt at establishing norms of writing ability would require many more controls than are presently possible in writing research.

However, in comparing D.K.'s writing complexity via T-unit length averages across the grades, I hope to provide a picture of his emerging maturity.

What follows is a list of D.K.'s T-unit length averages from the third to the mid-eigth grade:

Third.....9.9 words per T-unit

Fourth.....8.8 words per T-unit

Fifth.....8.7 words per T-unit

Sixth.....11.5 words per T-unit

Seventh.....11.1 words per T-unit

Eighth.....11.2 words per T-unit

Although they differ very little from Hunt's figures, they do have a strange way of evolving. All of the above measurements were based on varying--but measurable--amounts of writing at each grade level. Nearly 9500 words in 891 T-units were studied in these six grades. They represent mainly the narrative mode at all grade levels and the expository mode at all but the fifth and eigth grades.

What stands out here is the leap of syntactic complexity from the 5th to the 6th grade, where a gain of nearly three full words is posted. The O'Donnell et al study revealed a similar dramatic change in writing ability at this approximate juncture. D.K.'s change came as a surprise to me, especially since he was supported by a writing-oriented teacher in the fourth grade but

not in the fifth. His fourth-grade teacher motivated an incredible amount of writing out of him, while the fifth-grade teacher did not; the latter claimed that writing should only come at the end of the year, when all the grammatical prerequisites had been dealt with. What writing he produced in the fifth grade was no different in syntactic complexity or maturity from writings in the fourth grade.

No explanation is offered here concerning this leap of writing ability at the sixth-grade level. I can only verify once again that it occurs. Although it seems to keep cropping up, I know of no explanation for it--other than the usual puberty-cognitive change explanations.

When you follow the writing development of one child, there are bound to be mysterious occurrences. Unlike large group research, the oddities do not disappear via any centering tendencies. For instance, D.K. seems to be caught up in the exclusive use of two modes, narration and exposition. Studies in writing development via mode have revealed different syntactic pathways via different mode bases. For instance, argument seems to reveal

the highest syntactic complexity in children's writings, while exposition and narration account for middle levels of syntactic complexity, and description reveals the least complex syntax. I feel privileged this afternoon to be on the same program with one of the leading investigators of mode's relationship to syntax, Dr. Christine San José. Her investigations encouraged my own research. And our findings seem to agree that the modes themselves call up certain structuring tendencies by use alone. In other words, switching from mode to mode may have a natural "stretching" influence on children's writing skills.

I was conscious of this as I studied D.K.'s writings. And I was surprised to find the dominance of the two modes, narration and exposition, over the grades. I had always been under the impression that description would be more likely in the early grades, at least more likely than exposition. There was never any doubt about narration being the most prevalent mode. But I did wonder when I tried to present him with themes directing themselves to writing in description and argumentation. He produced "description"

that could only be classified as narration, and "argumentation" that could only be classified as exposition. I tried this again at the sixth-grade level and found that he now was able to direct his writing within the two unused mode bases.

This led me to believe that he either rejected--or demonstrated an inability to deal with--modes he has not experienced (at least until he is syntactically capable). The implication of all this is that if beginning writers are limited to only a couple of modes, then this restricts their potential by keeping them from valid "stretching" experiences. I think this is as true when it comes to the modes as it is when it comes to different styles of writing, different audiences to write to, different environments to write in and about, etc. There are other implications; anyone interested may read my reports on "The Impact of Mode on Written Syntactic Complexity," which appear in Studies in Language Education out of the University of Georgia (also in ERIC). The same concerns are reflected in a recent article, "Thinking and Writing," by Ken Kantor and myself, which appeared last month in

Language Arts (October 1977).

The limited mode base of D.K.'s writing reflect the limited nature of the writing programs he has encountered in the public schools. I do believe his writing efforts reflect a typical public school program. He has attended schools in three states, two western and one southern. They may not be representative of public schools in general, but they are of current teaching methods.

Any progress D.K. has made may be more directly related to his experiences with a few good teachers than his experience with textbooks or curriculum. D.K. often refers to his fourth-grade teacher as his "best teacher." In fact, she provided him with the kind of motivation and feedback which led to 25% of the production of writings discussed here. It was during that fourth-grade year that he wrote at least one lengthy creative story a month, did book reports, and kept a two-week log of a vacation trip. And it was in that 1425-word log that I noticed skillfully detailed observations begin to emerge along with more complex syntactic structures. Unlike most of his other teachers, she dealt with

no grammatical entities in writing, and kept grammar study separate. Her corrections were more personal--seldom occurring as red pencil marks on his papers; in fact, most of her comments on his paper, were directed at the content, in amusing and interested ways. Her methods were similar to his sixth-grade teacher's methods, but the latter did not provide the supportive feedback--and did not motivate as much fluency.

Two other points I'll mention here involve conjoining elements at the beginning of sentences and some insights involving the potential for a study of the verb phrase.

I was surprised to discover in studying the use of conjunctions ("and", "but", "or", etc.) as T-unit openers that they reveal very little about D.K.'s skill as a writer. It was Hunt's original study which referred to the young writer's tendency to use conjoining openers. However, I found that D.K. used them to begin as many T-units at the third-grade level as at the eighth. In the third grade, he used the conjoining openers "and," "but," or "or" 39% of the time; in the fourth grade, this dropped to 28%; in the fifth, it rose again to 35%; in the sixth, it dropped down

to 28% again; in the seventh, it rose to 30%; and finally, in the eighth grade it leaped to 45%. It appears that focusing on conjoining elements at the beginning of T-units is unrevealing, especially if we are interested in students' writing skills. Many teachers find the use of "and" or "but" at the front of sentences offensive. However, the best writers use them--and D.K. is no exception, regardless of his increasing syntactic strength.

As I studied his writing products over the grades, I began to see how T-unit expansion came to focus less and less on clause increases by size or number. It seemed that verb phrase expansion began to play an increasingly important role in the middle grades where clause expansion seemed to become less and less revealing. For example, D.K.'s first writing involved a typical beginner's sentence structure (see Harris's article in Research in the Teaching of English, Fall 1977): a statement using a noun marker, noun, be-verb, and noun complement:

And the wich very good wich.

In the writing, the be-verb was left out and later inserted by D.K. when asked what it said. Compare that to the sentence which follows--one produced only 18 months later as a fourth grader:

> Then we tried to jump or dive in and swim and touch the wall across the pool and come back and touch the wall that we started from.

This sentence not only includes infinitive phrases but conjoined infinitives with particles on some, along with adverbial modifiers, and direct objects with others, along with a full adjective clause. The verb's dynamic growth potential is demonstrated in the repetitious power of expansion and meaning-bearing structural inclinations. A sentence from his seventh-grade writing illustrates this further via a conjoined verb phrase:

> They told me that if I let them do this with me that they would give me the thygon (medicine) to make my mom and dad get better from the disease they caught and told me that I would die before I could have gotten back from the Planet Rionas because it takes two months to get there and back.

That 60-word sentence includes some eight verbal elements that are embedded in a very complex yet cognitively right-branching and understandable manner.

As an aside, I'll mention an interesting occurrence. I took the above sentence and several others like it, and broke them down into sentence-combining problems. These I submitted to him as a rewriting task recently, several months after their original creation in free writing. He immediately recalled the content as his own writing. But he couldn't remember how he originally had written them, nor how to re-combine them to solve the sentence-combining problems. He had experienced sentence-combining before, so it was mostly a matter of their logical complexity. I believe this complexity directly reflects the difficulty of the verb phrase changes that may go beyond the surface logic of sentence-combining challenges.

The main insight at this halfway point, then, is that writing maturity at the middle school years and beyond may not lend itself to investigations via clause expansions--as was done

in the early T-unit studies (those focusing on clauses per T-unit and words per clause). As the years pass, more complex structures are required to carry the writer's ideas; it appears that the shift of structuring power is to the verb phrase. I hope to focus on such insights through the remaining years of this case study. For now, I feel like the poet who long ago said:

There was an old man
And he had a calf
  And that's half ...

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